
Maneuver in the Defense

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The tactics of the United States Army have evolved and changed over the years for a number of reasons. Before the 1980s our Army was oriented to the defense and our tactics reflected that emphasis. Since that time, however, we have taken an offensive orientation, something seen in current tactical doctrine. The problem is that although our offensive doctrine and tactics have kept up with changes in technology, our defensive doctrine has not. Different equipment and organizations between light and heavy units cause us to fight differently. I believe we are at a doctrinal turning point in the way light units defend.

Heavy forces are able to conduct a linear defense. With their mechanized vehicles and heavy equipment, they can defend in relatively open areas. Light units, on the other hand, are forced to defend in restrictive terrain. Faced with a heavy enemy threat, their advantage lies in forcing mechanized units to dismount and then fight as dismounted infantry against dismounted infantry. When light units defend in open or

nonrestrictive terrain, they only succeed in slowing the enemy down.

Although we know that light units must defend in restrictive terrain, we haven't modified our doctrine to fit this scenario. We still want a linear defense. With the combat power of a light infantry unit, this stay-in-place linear defense is difficult to execute effec-

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tively. We are trained to prepare our fighting position, stay in it, and fight from it as we always have done.

This does not mean that fighting positions are no longer important. A soldier has to have a position with at least 18 inches of overhead cover—one that protects him from enemy indirect fire. It would be ideal if he could also fight from such a position, but this is

where dismounted light infantry falls into a different category.

If light infantry forces are positioned correctly in the defense, they will be in built-up areas or some other type of restrictive terrain. They have to be positioned where they can survive against a heavy mechanized force. To operate in such terrain, the heavy mechanized force would then have to dismount to clear obstacles or neutralize the light forces defending before it could proceed. In making the heavy force dismount, the light unit forces a dismounted fight where it has the advantage.

Quite often, light forces use restrictive terrain to overlook or defend obstacles that impede or slow the movement of heavy forces. What we have done traditionally is to position our forces in a linear configuration overlooking the obstacle. Where we are defending several obstacles, we find ourselves even more dispersed on line, fighting from prepared positions. What happens (most of the time) is that the enemy forces will dismount, attempt to

turn to our flanks, or move to our rear and try to attack us at our weakest point. They seek to roll up our flanks and defeat our units piecemeal, and they can do this if we are linear and stay in our fighting positions. If the enemy wants an obstacle badly enough, he will mass his forces at one point and attempt to penetrate our linear defense before he begins to roll up the flanks. This has been our problem with light infantry. The problem is how to get everyone into the fight.

If we are given a piece of terrain that is too wide to cover or too large to put one fighting position every 10 meters, how then do we make sure we are covering the key avenues of approach? If we position around obstacles, with large gaps between positions, how do we ensure that if the enemy comes to one obstacle we can mass enough combat power to stop or defeat him? If we stay in our fighting positions, a large number of the force will never get into the fight. I propose, therefore, that we maneuver in the defense!

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We must break the old pattern of the linear defense when defending in restrictive terrain. Let me use a rifle company as an example:

A company is given a piece of restrictive terrain to defend. There are three different routes along which a mechanized force can travel. The unit assigns one platoon to each of these three obstacles. The platoons form some kind of overwatch or defensive position so that they cover the obstacle by fire to keep the mechanized force from passing

through. Depending on which corridor it chooses, the enemy unit will most likely send dismounted infantry to defeat the light infantry defending and clear the obstacle.

If they mass a company or more on one platoon defensive position, according to our current doctrine, that one platoon would fight out of its fighting positions, trying to defend against an entire company.

I propose that through observation posts, REMBASS (remotely monitored battlefield sensor system), or other early warning devices, we should determine which avenue of approach the enemy is using for his dismounted infantry. This would tell us which obstacle he is most likely to encounter. The defending unit would establish a trigger point with which to launch the other two platoons to mass assault, rush, or maneuver to predetermined positions. If there is time, they should move into pre-dug fighting positions with 18 inches of overhead cover. If not, the soldiers might just scratch out positions deep enough to gain some protection. The other two platoons have now moved to a position where they can get into the fight to defeat the dismounted enemy attack. This gets our entire company into the fight—not just one platoon that happens to be defending the obstacle the enemy decides to penetrate.

We need fighting positions with at least 18 inches of overhead cover to protect our soldiers from an artillery barrage or any indirect fires the enemy will use to help his advance. This overhead protection is necessary because the trigger point we establish will be well within range of the enemy's indirect fire. When the enemy is maneuvering to our positions, his indirect fires have either shifted beyond us or stopped altogether. We have to be prepared—and able—to get out of our fighting positions and maneuver to get into the fight.

This concept of maneuvering in the defense in restrictive terrain has several variables that must be considered. Enemy capabilities, number, size, type terrain, speed of movement are only a few of these. There is also the discussion of where light infantry should defend.

Overwatching the obstacle with the entire force may not be the best idea. Positioning forces where they can best defeat the dismounted infantry attack should be the prime consideration. We must assume that the enemy reconnaissance elements will know where our obstacles are. The dismounted infantry will be deployed well in advance of their mechanized forces. Perhaps it would help to explain what happened to our

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brigade of the 101st Airborne Division during a rotation to the Joint Readiness Training Center.

We had been given a mission to defend in sector against a mechanized force. We conducted a good terrain analysis and determined the corridors along which the enemy could maneuver. Since we had a battalion of AH64s in overwatch, we discarded the open corridors. We believed the enemy would avoid open areas for fear of being destroyed by Hellfire missiles. We felt he would probably skirt the woodline and go where we would least expect him to go, because this would be his best chance of penetrating our sector.

From our terrain analysis of the ridge, we found several trails that the enemy could follow. We knew we would not be able to place obstacles on each of these trails. Walking the ground we identified the ones he was most likely to take and built obstacles blocking these avenues of approach. The battalion commanders then placed their companies, and in some cases platoons, to overwatch the obstacles. This did not mean an entire platoon was overwatching the obstacle; a portion of the platoon—a fire team or squad—had eyes on the obstacle with the ability to call indirect fire while the rest of the platoon was placed to defend and defeat the dismounted attack.

The company commander then walked from platoon to platoon looking for routes and alternate positions each could assume if it had to maneuver to get into the fight. We designated the triggers that would launch a platoon to maneuver. Units conducted rehearsals in which each platoon maneuvered to another position. We confirmed and timed routes and began preparations of alternate positions. Fires were coordinated, target reference points established, and control measures emplaced to eliminate the probability of fratricide if the maneuver occurred at night.

We had read the ground correctly: The enemy chose to breach the obstacles we wanted him to attempt to breach. As predicted, he launched a dismounted force to destroy the light infantry in overwatch of the obstacles, but to our surprise the enemy moved completely around us and attacked from the rear.

One company was not successful, because the company commander was still focused forward, defending to the front. He missed the trigger points to launch the other platoons' maneuver and failed to get them into the fight. It was

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no surprise that the enemy company defeated one platoon then moved to the next, rolling up the company's flank, and defeated them piecemeal. They successfully cleared the obstacles, which allowed a portion of the mechanized force to pass through.

In another company sector, the company commander successfully launched his platoons at the proper trigger points to maneuver them and get them into the fight. He successfully defeated the dismounted attack. He

was able to overwatch the obstacle with two soldiers, who continued to call indirect fire on the obstacle to prevent the enemy from clearing it. He was able to deny the mechanized force passage through his sector, which supported the brigade plan.

Light infantry must perform several critical tasks when defending in restrictive terrain. As in any defense, the most important task may be conducting a thorough terrain analysis and walking the ground to find the best defensive positions. You must force the enemy to dismount. Because you are defending to defeat the dismounted infantry attack, the positioning of your crew-served weapons (machineguns in particular) is critical. An analysis of METT-T (mission, enemy, terrain, troops available, and time) will determine whether you defend forward, rearward, or all around. The enemy will try to find your weakness. Light infantry alone is no match for a heavy force. If you select your defense correctly, you will have the advantage of knowing the terrain, having rehearsed fighting positions, routes, or lanes for maneuver, and—if it is a night engagement using night vision goggles.

Other critical tasks include rehearsing your maneuver. Time your maneuver day and night to see how long it takes. Make sure you have several means of determining the direction of the enemy's movement, and identify accurate trigger points to launch your maneuver. Early-warning devices, booby traps, observation posts, and REMBASS are some of the tools at your disposal. Making the right call, at the right time, to launch your maneuver and get your entire force into the fight could be the difference between success and failure.

Light infantry commanders must break the pattern of defending in a purely linear defense or fighting from a fixed position in restrictive terrain. We can say that if we have time we will dig primary, alternate, and supplementary positions, but reality and normal defense times tell us we will be lucky to complete one position to standard. We may not even have time to scratch out a

position. We may have to maneuver to a place where we fight from a prone position with little cover. Still, the greatest advantage—and imperative—is that we get our entire force into the fight on time and place effective fires where they are needed.

Look at restrictive terrain from a light infantry viewpoint. You are digging your fighting positions and building obstacles to channel the enemy to

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enter your established engagement areas. In restrictive terrain, the engagement areas we are talking about are aimed at defeating dismounted infantry. The obstacles will stop vehicles only if we defeat the dismounted infantry. I can't stress this enough: Light infantry must focus on the dismounted infantry threat in restrictive terrain. Light infantry must train on defensive tasks correctly and realistically. Review what has to be done to succeed. If you don't have enough time to train on the defense completely, break up the tasks into smaller pieces. There is more to the defense than just digging your fighting position. Train as you will fight, and don't expect to defend as a light force against a heavy force in open terrain. I am confident that light forces, if used properly in restrictive terrain, can effectively restrict, stop, and defeat a heavy enemy force.

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